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Two Rescues, One History: Everyday Racism in Australia

If you watched television or read the newspapers in Australia, or even chatted with friends, on 9 May 2006, you knew that an extraordinary rescue had just taken place. Two miners trapped 925 metres underground by a rockfall that had also killed another miner, Larry Knight, had been brought to the surface after fourteen days. As one commentator remarked, the timing of their appearance fitted in well with the constraints of breakfast-television current affairs programs. After all, Todd Russell and Brant Webb were not brought straight to the surface. They had been able to stop off on the way to have a shower and change into some fresh clothes. Consequently, when they did walk out of the mine's lift at 5.59am they looked as spry and clean as when they got to work on 25 April, Anzac Day. Then, in front of the huge media contingent, the two men 'clocked off,' removing their name tags from the board that showed who was down the mine, before embracing their waiting wives.

The media and Australia lapped it up. What more could Australia ask for—two Aussie working men, tested in a battle with nature, coming through it unscathed; and then there was that laconic Aussie humour and the romance. What most Australians never found out, because it hardly rated a mention in the media and when it did it was

completely overtaken by the mining rescue, was that, at the other end of Australia, in the far north as it is sometimes called in those urban centres of Sydney and Melbourne, and, far north Queensland or F.N.Q. as it is called in Brisbane, capital of that state, another rescue was taking place.

On 17 April John Tabo, his son John junior and his nephew Tom had put to sea from their home on the island of Mer in the Torres Strait in a five metre dinghy. They had planned to travel to Masig, also called Yorke Island, about sixty kilometres away, to pick up some members of a rugby league team. Among the Torres Strait islands this is the kind of journey made every day. There would have been nothing special this time either, except for Cyclone Monica. When Monica changed course and headed down the coast to Queensland it caught the Tabos as unaware as did the 'seismic event,' as it came to be called, that caused the rockfall that trapped Russell and Webb. The Tabos' dinghy was blown off course in the huge seas. Without the navigation equipment that John Tabo had not expected they would need, the three found themselves adrift in the open sea with no way of knowing which way to point the boat. They ran out of petrol for the outboard motor. Drifting, they fashioned makeshift paddles out of empty plastic fuel containers and worked metal tins into hats to protect their heads and faces from the dangerous tropical sun. They spent some days on a barren sand cay waiting for Monica's winds to abate. During all this time the Tabos collected rainwater to drink and ate raw clams and squid that they caught in a throw net they happened to have with them in the boat. After a week the search for them was called off.

Luckily, the Tabos had a mobile phone with them. In the Torres Strait mobile reception is limited to a distance beyond each island. The Tabos kept their phone

switched off to preserve the battery only putting it on briefly once or twice a day to check if there was a signal. Finally, on 9 May, there was. They sent seven text messages to be sure—a text message uses less battery power than phoning someone—‘Need help, fuel, food.’ Relatives told the Queensland police and, at just past 4.00 in the afternoon, an Australian Search and Rescue helicopter winched the three men up from their dinghy and flew them back the seventeen nautical miles to Mer, also known as Murray Island. The men had lost around twenty or thirty kilos each during their ordeal.

Unlike Beaconsfield there was no media contingent on Mer to report on the Tabos’ arrival and where Russell and Webb needed to get themselves a celebrity manager to handle the competing offers for their stories of life in a cramped mining cage nearly a kilometre underground, the Tabos, after twenty-two days lost at sea, appear to have simply gone back to their daily lives.

The Reportage

Regional ABC in Cairns reported the news of the Tabos’ amazing rescue and Ian Gerard had a short report published in *The Australian* on 10 May: ‘Trio rescued after three weeks adrift.’ Also on 10 May, Lisa Millar on the ABC radio’s national current affairs program, *The World Today*, reported the story under the heading, ‘Islanders’ great escape.’ The reference to a great escape connects the Tabos’ tale of endurance to that of the miners by way of the developing tendency to describe that rescue in terms of a great escape. In a publicity coup, Sustagen, the milk-based health drink company, had provided the miners with business cards that read ‘The Great Escape’ and then: ‘To all who have supported us and our families, we cannot wait to shake your hand and shout

you a Sustagen. Thanks is not enough.’ Russell and Webb handed these out after they reached the mine’s surface.¹ Bill Shorten, the Australian Workers’ Union national secretary, picked up on this rhetoric describing the miners’ rescue to the media as ‘the great escape’ and saying that: ‘This is the biggest escape from the biggest prison we have, the planet’ (‘Beaconsfield Celebrates Mine Miracle,’ 2006). This expansion of the ‘great escape’ idea, which I shall discuss further below, at the very least functions as an expression of the alienation from the land of Australia which has been a characteristic of European colonization of the continent. Here, however, in Millar’s story, the reference to a great escape serves to make the miners’ rescue the touchstone for thinking about the Tabos: ‘While Australia has been focused on the extraordinary story of the rescue of the Beaconsfield miners this week, at the other end of Australia another tale of endurance and survival has been unfolding.’ Within the Torres Strait the rescue of the Tabos was becoming known as the ‘Mer miracle’ (for example, the *Torres News* used this as a headline on 17-23 May 2006). Miracle is a term which, among other things, reflects the importance of Christianity on the Torres Strait Islands since the coming of the London Missionary Society in 1871.

On 11 May the Brisbane *Sunday Mail* published a different story about the Tabos by Gerard. Possibly influenced by Millar’s radio segment, he began: ‘Just a day after miners Todd Russell and Brant Webb walked free from their underground cage in Tasmania, a similarly miraculous tale of survival was unfolding in the nation’s north’ (Gerard, 2006). It is important to ask what the difference would be if the media scrum had been around the Tabos’ story and if that had become the measure for reporting on the miners’ story. Much of this article is about why that could not have happened.

Let me contextualise this by making an observation. On 19 May 2006, Prime Minister John Howard held a reception for Russell and Webb at Parliament House in Canberra. It should go without saying that no reception was held for the Tabos. Howard gave a speech in which he held up the two miners as a mirror for the nation. They embody, he said: ‘All of the things that we pride ourselves on as distinctively Australian characteristics at work—we saw guts, we saw resilience, we saw courage, we saw strength, enormous endurance’ (“Beaconsfield miners pay tribute to rescuers,” 2006). Almost three weeks earlier, on 10 May, Inspector Russell Rhodes of the Queensland police, paid tribute to the Tabos: “‘They have tremendous resilience, these people,” Insp. Rhodes said. “They’re experienced sea people and they have a tremendous determination to survive”’ (“Torres Strait sea rescue an ‘Act of God’,” 2006). Certainly Rhodes is a lowly police inspector and Howard is Australia’s prime minister but Howard has never commented publicly on the Tabos’ story so it has been left to Rhodes to present Australia’s tribute. Howard uses the inclusive ‘we’; we Australians. Who are ‘we’ here? Rhodes gives ‘them’ the same qualities that Howard suggests typify Australians, most obviously both Howard and Rhodes use resilience as a descriptor, but for Rhodes ‘they’ are not a part of ‘us’.

We, it seems, are suspicious of them and their stories. On 10 May, under the headline, ‘22 days at sea,’ the Brisbane *Courier Mail* published the first of three reports on the Tabos’ rescue. The account begins by telling readers that the three Torres Strait Islanders were ‘purportedly missing at sea for 22 days.’ In spite of the fact that we know from other reports that the men went missing on 17 April and that a search was instituted and called off after a week, the *Courier Mail* suggests a lack of credibility in the men’s

story by writing that they ‘told police last night they had been at sea since April 17.’ Later, the article becomes more forthright saying that, ‘it’s believed some authorities doubt the claims of the men.’ While making this aspersion the article carefully hedges by not identifying which ‘authorities,’ which means that the claim cannot be checked, and by implying a degree of doubt in the claim. Subsequently, the article quotes a woman who, it implies, is saying something of great concern by writing that she ‘didn’t want to be identified,’ saying that, ‘it was a coincidence that they [The Tabos] were found the same day the Tasmanian miners were freed.’ Here, Russell and Webb’s rescue takes on a moral quality. Their ‘honest’ drama might have been being used as a cloak by the possibly dishonest Torres Strait Islanders so that, perhaps, the police might not come to know of their return, or be so distracted by the extraordinary events going on in Beaconsfield that the Tabos’ return would not be followed up.

Some years ago I published an article in which I argued that:

‘Australian’ history has traditionally located itself in a factual history of white settlement occurring from the south-east of the continent. The north of the continent has been constructed as the site of the Other, of that which has been repressed in the south’s production of the real. (Stratton, 1989, p. 38)

In the distinction that is made between the miners’ rescue and the Tabos’ rescue we see this divide being played out in everyday life. One of the important qualities of the northern, apparently less real, history is that it is also more indigenous—though the term ‘indigenous’ needs to be treated circumspectly as in its general usage of describing a people’s presence before colonization it assumes that colonization for the term to have

meaning. In the article under discussion here, we see how the greater reality assumed for the white and southern is used to problematise the northern and indigenous.

Finally, the article comes clean: ‘There were rumours circulating in the days after the men went missing that they had been found and were hiding out to escape police prosecution.’ Again, we are not given any source for the rumours. Nor are we told what the Tabos might have done that the police were supposedly looking for them. Just in case all this might not be enough to undermine the extraordinary nature of the Tabos’ feat, the article ends on a different tack: ‘It is understood the small fibreglass (sic) boat had no safety equipment.’ ‘They,’ it seems, not only engage in illegal activity, contravening Australian laws, but they also cannot be trusted to prepare their boat properly before setting out on an inter-island trip. In short, while reporting the amazing achievement of the Tabos in surviving for twenty-two days in extremely adverse conditions, the article simultaneously undermines the Tabos, casting doubt on the veracity of their story and suggesting that they are, in fact, criminals.

We can compare this with the reporting of the mining disaster. Almost all of the reportage on the trapped Tasmanian miners makes no mention that the gold mine had been in receivership since the owning company, Allstate Explorations, collapsed in 2001 and that Allstate, now run by an administrator in Perth, is now controlled by Macquarie Bank to whom Allstate owes \$47 million. It seems that Taylor Woodings, the administrators, sold Macquarie \$77.4 million of the debt for just \$300,000 (Trounson and Andrusiak, 2006). Now, with the price of gold at twenty-five year highs of around \$835 an ounce, the Beaconsfield mine has been under pressure to increase its output. Consequently, in the first three months of 2006, that is until three weeks before the

‘seismic event’ that killed Knight and trapped Russell and Webb, gold production at the mine was up by twenty-four per cent. This required increased use of explosives. The blasting has been related to numerous earth tremors, or seismic events, that had been felt for about nine months by both townspeople and miners:

Linked to blasts a kilometre below the town’s surface, the earth movements were also deeply worrying for those working underground. If the tremors could scare the daylights out of townsfolk on the surface, how much more hazardous were they for the men working below? (Denholm, 2006)

According to this same report, published when Russell and Webb were still missing and thought possibly dead, Russell ‘was among the miners warning management about the dangers.’ However, by the time Russell and Webb were interviewed on Channel Nine after their rescue, Russell was absolving the mine management of responsibility for the accident. It would seem, then, that at the very least the story of the mine itself is of problematic business practices and dubious safety standards.

The bulk of the reportage, especially on television, concentrated on the human interest of the trapped miners and their rescue. It was this focus that enabled the narrative of Australianness and Australian qualities and values to become paramount. Indeed, because in both the miners’ and the travellers’ stories the centre of media interest lay in the men who were rescued, these narratives, taken both separately and together, emblematised what I am going to describe as everyday racism.

Everyday Racism

In *Race Daze* I differentiated ‘the policy of official multiculturalism’ from what I called ‘everyday multiculturalism.’ Identifying the latter as syncretic and rhizomatic I went on to write that: ‘I use these terms to describe how cultures, produced by individuals in their everyday lives, merge, creolise and transform as people live their lives, adapting to and resisting situations, and (mis)understanding, loving, hating and taking pleasure in other people with whom they come into contact’ (Stratton, 1998, p. 15). In short, everyday multiculturalism is a practice arising out of everyday life. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Errol Lawrence writes about what he calls ‘common-sense racist ideologies’ (Lawrence, 1982, p. 95). Lawrence uses Gramscian theory to think about the day-to-day, common-sense ideological legitimations that white English people in the 1960s and 1970s developed to justify their racist practices. Lawrence writes that: ‘Whilst we should not forget that these dominant definitions are contested, we must also remember that they are embodied within the dominant institutional order and are inscribed within the social relations of everyday life’ (1982, p. 50). Here, I am not concerned with these dominant definitions, these ideological legitimations. Rather I want to think about the practice of everyday racism. Everyday racism, though, is not a new term. In 1991 Philomena Essed published a book titled *Understanding Everyday Racism*. She writes that:

[R]acism is more than structure and ideology. As a practice it is routinely created and reinforced through the concept of “everyday racism” which connects structural forces of racism with routine situations in everyday life. It links ideological dimensions of racism with daily attitudes and

interprets the reproduction of racism in terms of the experience of it in everyday life. (Essed, 1991, p. 2)

My interest here is with the formation of attitudes and understandings that are so embedded in the everyday life of a racialised culture, in this case Australian culture, that the members of that culture, those that, loosely, we might call Australians, don't even recognise themselves as making decisions based in a racialised history.

With its shaping in nineteenth-century racial ideologies, the culture that we call 'Australian' leads members of that culture to have a range of taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations to differentiate between groupings of people. It is these shared assumptions and expectations that produce the practice of everyday racism. The individuals involved may well claim that they are non-racist, or even anti-racist. Consciously they would be right. Using Lawrence's terms, in Australia everyday racism permeates the dominant institutional order and the social relations of everyday life because race and racialised preferences are core structuring mechanisms of Australian culture. To put it more succinctly, the weight of Australia's racialised and racist past weighs heavily on Australia's multicultural present, both in government policy and in everyday life. This article considers why it is that Australians, whoever they are, should find it surprising, if not inconceivable, to make the rescue of three Torres Strait Islanders the touchstone for the rescue of two (Anglo-)Australian miners.

The Miners

I want to begin by going back to Shorten's comments after the rescue of the miners. In the media absence of the mine manager Shorten became the person to whom the media turned for daily briefings on the rescue effort. After the rescue Shorten's comments were widely disseminated and repeated. He began by talking about the rescue as an escape, as 'the biggest escape.' Later, he refined this. The rescue became, 'the great escape from under the ground.' This idea of the miners' rescue as a 'great escape' was picked up and reused in much media commentary. The reason for this has much to do with the resonance of the term. *The Great Escape* is a still-popular film released in 1963, with Steve McQueen. The story is based on the escape by allied prisoners of war from the German Stalag Luft III camp in 1944. Also starring James Coburn and Charles Bronson, the most memorable scene has the blond, blue-eyed McQueen's character riding a motorbike over a barbed wire fence to safety in Switzerland. It goes without saying that, this being a story set in World War 2 Europe, all the characters are white thus naturally reinforcing the whiteness of the miners.

One further resonance here is to Anzac Day, the day that commemorates Australia's participation in wars. As it happened, as I have mentioned, the seismic event that killed Knight and trapped Russell and Webb took place on Anzac Day—a day which, for most Australians, is a public holiday. But that is not the most important thing about Anzac Day for this story. Fiona Nicoll writes about the Australian War Memorial, the centre-piece of the memory process associated with Anzac Day that:

In commemorating a great sacrifice that occurred *elsewhere*, the Memorial articulates an important element of a white nationalist ontology. The construction of the Great War as a test, or process of 'bleeding', through

which a previously ‘innocent’ Australia passed into a state of national ‘maturity’, pervades Anzac mythology. (Nicoll, 2001, p. 175)

The point here is twofold. First, that the memorialising connected with Anzac Day has been an instatement of Australian whiteness, an assertion of Australia as a white country; second, as Nicoll goes on to argue in different terms, that this memorialization represses the genocidal settler wars on Aborigines. That the seismic event happened on Anzac Day, then, helped to reinforce the whiteness of the narrative of the miners’ story by association and, by implication, identified it with settler part of the Australian population at the expense of indigenous Australians—and, for the purposes of my argument, I want to emphasise Torres Strait Islanders.

If a film about an escape from a prisoner of war camp is the most immediate reference for Shorten’s rhetoric it is by no means the most profound. It was not a coincidence that so many journalists were able to get to Beaconsfield so quickly. 28 April was the tenth anniversary of what has become known as the ‘Port Arthur massacre.’ In 1996 on that date Martin Bryant went to the Port Arthur heritage site with two rifles, an autoloading AR-15 and an FN FAL, killed thirty-five people and wounded a further thirty-seven. The Broad Arrow Café, the site of the majority of the murders, was subsequently turned into ‘a place of quiet reflection’ as a memorial to those Bryant killed.

The point here, though, has not so much to do with the massacre itself as with where the massacre took place, Port Arthur. For Port Arthur was a secondary penal settlement, a place where convicts who had been transported to the penal colony of Van Dieman’s Land were sent if they offended again. In 1999 John Frow published a piece

about the insistence of the memory of Port Arthur in which he refers to the massacre and to the Broad Arrow Café:

‘Nobody uses Bryant’s name but his denied presence is everywhere.

Nobody knows the forms which will lay the ghost. Nobody knows what kind of monument will insert this story into the other story for which the site is known, into that past which is barely available for understanding.’

(Frow, 2000, p. 2)

The media were arriving in Tasmania for the massacre commemoration service.

Bryant has never given a reason why he went on his horrific shooting spree. Nor has he spoken about why he chose Port Arthur. However, Port Arthur in popular memory is the site of the most notorious secondary penal settlement in Tasmania, the site where, during the time of its operation, the rule of law was attenuated to the point of non-existence. Bryant must have felt some association between the place and the murderous act he planned to commit. In spite of questions about his mental health, and the general acknowledgement of his low intelligence, Bryant was deemed fit to stand trial. He is now incarcerated in Risdon prison with the condition that he should never be released. In another resonance of Shorten’s expression, Tasmanians fervently hope that Bryant will never make his great escape.

By now it should be clear that Shorten’s turn of phrase was highly evocative, conjuring resonances that go back to the British settlement of Tasmania, to the convict era. Given this context, the use of the film reference helps to enforce a positive valence for the idea of escape. The film makes heroes of these POWs seeking escape from Nazi imprisonment. The incarceration and escape image was not the only metaphor Shorten

and others had to hand. Another possibility was that of being buried alive. The American CBS News used this image on 9 May when it talked about ‘the men who were buried April 25th’ (“Aussie miners emerge,” 2006). Rhodes, the Queensland police inspector we have already met, also used the image: ‘At one end of the country there’s two men rescued from an entombed mine. . . .,’ he said (“Torres Strait sea rescue,” 2006). The idea of being buried alive has been a powerful Gothic image since Edgar Allan Poe published his short story ‘The Premature Burial’ in 1850. As recently as 1990 a horror film using this theme titled *Buried Alive!* was released. However, in Tasmania, and mainland Australia, the theme of premature burial does not resonate as profoundly as a metaphor that evokes white Australia’s popular memory of convict origins.

Frow asks, ‘how has the lived violence of Port Arthur’s past been folded into national historical time?’ (2000, p. 9). In this instance we can find an answer in Shorten’s, and others’, choice of rhetoric. The British first established a settlement on the island then called Van Dieman’s Land in 1803. The first convicts arrived from England in 1812 and the first free settlers four years later. Robert Hughes writes that:

In convict lore, Van Dieman’s Land always had the worst reputation for severity. Its name induced a *frisson* that later became integral to Australian culture. (Hughes, 1987, p. 368)

We need to think carefully, if briefly, here about penal colonies and transportation. As Michel Foucault pointed out in *Madness and Civilization*, the modern state is founded on a conceptual privileging of confinement. The obverse of confinement is exclusion, figured in the case of convicts as transportation. Foucault was remarkably dismissive of transportation. In *Discipline and Punish*, he wrote in passing that: ‘The only alternative

[to prison] envisaged was deportation, which England abandoned at the beginning of the nineteenth century and which France took up under the Second Empire, but rather as a rigorous and distant form of imprisonment' (Foucault, 1977, p. 272). Yet in 1802, Jeremy Bentham had titled one of his tracts in support of the panopticon, his model prison, *Panopticon versus New South Wales*. Bentham knew how seriously the British took transportation as a form of punishment. In Tasmania the acceptance of transported prisoners did not cease until 1856, the same year that the state's name was changed and it gained an elected legislature. We need to remember, though, as Foucault indicates, that, while transportation implied exclusion from the home territory of the state, the place to which the convicts were transported, the penal colony, became, itself, a place of confinement. It is this linking of exclusion and confinement that makes transportation a modern idea. The earlier practice of banishment simply involved sending a person away, either beyond the rule of the banisher or to a place where the banisher would not exercise further punishment.

In England transportation had been evolving out of the idea of banishment since the later sixteenth century. Between 1655 and 1699, A. G. L. Shaw writes, 'about 4,500 criminals were transported' to the Caribbean and American colonies (1966, p. 24). The first Transportation Act was proclaimed in 1718. In English thinking the penal colony was not a place outside of the state. Rather, it was an extension of the state on new land where the power of the state could be enforced.

In English thinking the penal colony always seems to have had an ambiguous status as both administrated prison space and colonisable space for settlers. Thus, as

David Neal has shown, one of the most crucial political battles in the Australian colonies was over the establishment of the rule of law.

‘Damn the Law! My will is the Law!’, Governor Bligh expostulated with a fine disregard for the rule of law tradition. He was not the last of the military and naval governors of New South Wales to become impatient of the checks placed on his authority. Justice Jeffery Bent scorned Governor Macquarie’s principle of government described by the judge as, ‘*quod gubernatori placet, legis habet vigorem*’. (Neal, 1991, p. 78)

Summing up Neal’s historical argument, Stefan Petrow writes that, it ‘was not until a partially elected legislature was formed in 1842 that, Neal argues, New South Wales finally changed from a penal colony to a free society’ (Petrow, 2000). In Van Dieman’s Land, Petrow writes that: ‘The court system was a travesty of the rule of law.’ As we shall see, this deeply rooted denial of the acknowledgement of the rights of individuals who come under the power of what is now the Australian state is a theme that runs through Australian government to the present day.

The French watched the English experience in Australia and, when they decided to establish penal colonies, they were determined not to make the same mistakes:

What [the French] took for mistakes included all features of colonial Australia that made possible some semblance of normal life for convicts and ex-convicts there. These included the commingling of convicts, ex-convicts and free emigrants in the same settlements; the employment of convict workers in private enterprise; the lack of special surveillance

methods for Emancipists; and the liberality of judges toward convicts and Emancipists. (Spieler, 2005, p. 190)

The French penal colony remained, administratively, a prison governed outside of laws applicable to free citizens. When Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur arrived in Van Dieman's Land in 1824 he would have had much sympathy with the French. Arthur had been commissioned in England to make Van Dieman's Land a place of terror in order to dissuade potential criminals from breaking the law. For Arthur:

Those who "knowingly" emigrated to a convict colony, which was in effect "an immense Gaol or Penitentiary", should not expect "to retain every immunity and privilege" they enjoyed in England and should "abide cheerfully by the rules and customs of the Prison." There could be "no happiness nor prosperity without personal security," and this could only be secured by "*severe discipline*". (Petrov, 2000)

An important element of Arthur's disciplinary system was incarceration in confined spaces. One of the places Arthur sent convicts he considered worthy of greater punishment were the bridgeworks for spanning the River Derwent. In Hughes' words: 'The facilities provided there ... included cells that were more like animals' lairs, seven feet long and less than three feet high, the men crawled into them at night and were padlocked there, behind a stout lattice, unable to stand or sit' (Hughes, 1987, p. 387). At Port Arthur, Charles Booth, appointed commandant three years after Arthur founded the penal settlement, 'had solitary cells built, and special punishment cells, 7 feet by 4 feet and pitch dark ... For less "atrocious" offenders there were boxes like dog-kennels where the prisoner was chained, breaking stones from a pile in front of him' (Hughes, 1987, p.

404). The barred metal platform on which Russell and Webb were working is known as a ‘mine cage.’ It was 1.5 metres high, two metres wide and one point two metres long, that is just under five feet high, six and a half feet wide and just under four feet long. Coal was discovered within a reasonable distance from Port Arthur, about fifteen miles from Eaglehawk Neck:

What more chastening form of extra punishment than to turn convicts into miners, condemned to hard labour, darkness, extreme confinement and hourly fear of cave-ins? So Arthur reasoned, and told Booth to sink shafts there, worked by the most refractory prisoners. (Hughes, 1987, p. 407)

The echo of all this gets carried down the generations in the reproduction of cultural memory and memorialized at the Port Arthur heritage site. It is no wonder that the miners’ rescue was figured as an escape from a prison.

But Australia’s preoccupation with confinement is much more general than just the connection I have made here. Writing about the treatment of asylum seekers, Ghassan Hage makes this point well:

Well before the caging of illegal refugees, there were many examples of caging in Australian history. The Australian colonizing national will exterminated and caged Aboriginal people literally and metaphorically ... More recently Australians engaged in a massive exercise during World War II of caging and detaining ‘ethnics,’ including some who actually held Australian citizenship. (Hage, 1998, p. 111)

Hage's last point is mistaken as the concept of Australian citizenship did not exist until the Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1948 but this itself signals an uncertainty in who could be included as part of, and excluded from, the category of 'Australian' to which we must return when discussing the rescue of the Tabos.

As Hughes writes, referencing the correct generic topos: '[Arthur's] Utopia of punishment and reform would be an autocracy' (1987, p. 381). In France, starting in 1820, Pierre Ballache wrote an uncompleted utopia of punishment called *La Ville des expiations* (*The Town of Expiations*) published in fragments between 1832 and 1835 (see Spieler, 2005, chapter 5). Arthur founded Port Arthur as a secondary punishment settlement in 1830, a settlement for those who transgressed his regime in the Van Dieman's Land penal colony. Port Arthur is on the Tasman Peninsula past the narrow isthmus of Eaglehawk Neck. What does it mean to describe Port Arthur as utopian? Writing about Thomas More's originary modern utopia, the work from which the genre derives its name published in 1516, I have commented that, 'to the extent that difference is asserted, that [readers accept] the work is fictional, it becomes a realistic account of a fantasy, a representation of an already inscribed Otherness' (Stratton, 1990, p. 61). For a fantasy to be utopia, a no-place, it must be cut off from the 'real' world, the world of the everyday. The island can be constituted as the trope of this excision. To put it differently, Elizabeth McMahon argues that since More's text, 'utopias have always been represented as islands because they need absolute borders to fend off contamination from the world outside' (2003, p. 191). As a consequence utopias are simultaneously places of containment that can also be sites of confinement.

McMahon, who has much to say about the utopian quality of Tasmania in Australian culture, writes Tasmania that, ‘it has long epitomised the utopian/dystopian dilemma of the island within both the Australian imaginary and boreal projections of the antipodes more generally’ (2003, p. 195). Again, we must come back to this but Australian history is full of this use of islands from the penal colonization of Tasmania itself to the secondary penal settlement of Sarah Island off the west coast of Tasmania to the conversion of Torres Strait islands into ‘reserves’—including Mer—from which islanders needed permission to leave, to the use of the Papua and New Guinean Manus Island and the independent island of Nauru as sites for detention centres as a part of the Pacific Solution that the Australian government developed in 2001 to deal with the ‘problem’ of asylum seekers. The topos is also present in the way that the mainland of Australia has been consistently figured as an island. Technically, Australia is a continent rather than an island. The largest island in the world is said to be Greenland, but, as any web search will confirm, Australians think of the mainland of Australia as a huge island, indeed the largest in the world, surrounded by sea.²

In *Utopia*, the land that King Utopus conquers is not an island. Utopus takes over Abraxa and then orders a channel to be built to isolate the land renamed Utopia and convert it to an island: ‘To accomplish this [Utopus] ordered a deep channel to be dug fifteen miles long, and that the natives might not think he treated them like slaves, he not only forced the inhabitants, but also his own soldiers, to labour in carrying it on’ (More, 1989, book III). The construction of Utopia was a colonial enterprise in which the original, indigenous inhabitants were forced to destroy both literally and metaphorically

their connection with the everyday life that had been handed down from previous generations.

It may be that an element in the fascination of Port Arthur today lies in this similarity to Utopus' enterprise. The isthmus at Eaglehawk Neck is, as Hughes tells us, 'less than 100 yards wide' (1987, p. 406). To stop convicts escaping, nine tethered guard dogs were placed along the width, 'Booth increased the guard to twenty-five men, built guardhouses and sentry-boxes, and doubled the number of dogs' (p. 406). Booth even put dogs on platforms in the water. If all this sounds a little over the top to stop convicts we need to remember the importance of the utopian fantasy. McMahon remarks that the guard dogs, 'performed the same task as the unassailable trench of utopia (sic)' (2003, p. 200). Thomas Lempriere who worked at Port Arthur between 1833 and 1837, commented that: 'Whether Port Arthur is an 'Earthly Hell' or not, it has in all events its Cerberus ... [T]hese dogs form an impassable line' (qtd in Hughes, 1987, p. 406). Cerberus, a three-headed dog, guarded the entrance to Hades in Greek mythology. Lempriere understood the utopian nature of Port Arthur. About thirty years later, in the 1860s, a group of tourists wanted to pass Eaglehawk Neck to see the settlement. The commandant sent a message that they could 'freely enter into the enchanted ground of all wickedness' (qtd in Weidenhofer, 1981, p. 65). The isthmus crossing seems to have made people aware of the utopian quality of Port Arthur.

However, we must not stop here. The Tasman Peninsula exercised a strong hold over Arthur. Also in 1830, Arthur devised a plan to resolve the Aboriginal problem once and for all. Displaced from their lands, abused and massacred, the indigenous people of Tasmania were continuing to trouble the white settlers. In a utopian moment, Arthur

assembled all the settlers and the military in a long line across the settled part of the island and attempted to herd the Aborigines into the Tasman Peninsula. Arthur's plan was to isolate them between the beginning of the peninsula, at Forestier's Neck, and Eaglehawk Neck. Unlike King Utopus who, in the fashion of colonial fantasy, brought civilization and good government to the conquered people of Abraxa, Arthur's plan was to create another utopian site of confinement right next to his utopian penal settlement. The Black Line, as it was called, failed. However, by 1835 the remaining Aborigines, about 160 only, were relocated to Flinders Island, renamed from its indigenous name of Wybalenna. Arthur was still thinking in utopian terms. Having managed the confinement of the Tasmanian Aborigines to an island smaller than Tasmania, sounding like King Utopus he wrote to the new commandant of Flinders Island, Lieutenant Darling, in 1832: 'Your first duty will be to provide for the security of the Natives and to afford their protection, and as the great design of the Government in forming this Establishment is with a view to their civilisation, His Excellency places the fullest reliance on your exertions to accomplish this great and important object' (Ryan, 1996, p. 179). Typical of the Australian history of exclusionary confinement, by 1835, Lyndall Ryan tells us, 'the establishment had become a gaol' (p. 181).

Regardless of the actual colour of the convicts—there were, for example, nine convicts of African descent on the First Fleet—convict history in Australia is constructed as white. Moreover, since the 1980s having a convict ancestor has become something of which to be proud. Associating Russell and Webb with Tasmania's convict past affirms their whiteness at the same time that it reinforces their Australianness.

Both the Prime Minister and Kim Beazley, the Federal Leader of the Opposition, used the rhetoric of mateship which, as we shall see, is also claimed to have a convict heritage. Howard said: 'It has been a triumph of Australian mateship, the way in which the whole community worked together.' Beazley said: 'Australians just witnessed a rolled-gold miracle and a great Australian epic, an epic of mateship, an epic of family, responsibility for each other, of skill' ("Beaconsfield celebrates," 2006). Mateship is commonly thought of as a bonding process between men. However, its homoerotic connotation appears to have produced some more or less repressed anxiety when applied to two men forced into the extreme of personal intimacy for two weeks. For example, many reports helped readers think about the size of the mine cage by describing it as 'about the size of a double bed' and Russell himself played with homoeroticism when, in the miners' interview on Channel Nine after their release, he retailed how he had got Brant Webb to calm down at one point by threatening to kiss him.

Mateship is most importantly thought of as typically Australian. Russel Ward in his classic account of what he called the 'national *mystique*,' *The Australian Legend*, found it in:

the strongly egalitarian sentiment of group solidarity and loyalty, which was perhaps the most marked of all convict traits. This was recognized as the prime distinguishing mark of outback workers fifty years before Lawson and others wrote about mateship. (Ward, 1966, p. 77)

Mateship, then, is not only an Australian quality, it originates in those mythic white, Anglo-Celtic convicts. Thus, when Howard applies the term to 'the whole community,' while being unclear quite who is a member of this community—Beaconsfield?

Tasmania?, Australia?—the deep resonance is with Australian whiteness, as it would seem to be with that ‘we’ he used that I discussed earlier. To put it more specifically, my problem here is whether Howard’s community includes the Tabos, Mer people and more generally the inhabitants of the Torres Strait Islands. Beazley’s use is more specific. Probably, as befits a Labor leader, he is referring to the miners themselves and their rescuers. Again, though, what is being asserted is an implicit privileging of whiteness through a convict history. Nobody, to my knowledge, has described the Tabos’ survival in terms of mateship.

The Travellers

To think about how the Tabos are positioned in the Australian national imaginary we need to begin by remembering Inspector Rhodes’ description of the three men as part of ‘they,’ those ‘experienced sea people.’ Bound up in this apparently unexceptionable comment is the long history of racialisation, exclusion and confinement of the indigenous people incorporated into the space identified as Australia that bears on the present and informs the often unintentional everyday racism of Australians.

The Tabos come from Mer which is the most easterly of the Torres Strait Islands. In 1791 Captain Edwards of the H.M.S. Pandora, having been to Tahiti to take prisoner the seamen who had mutinied against Bligh on the Bounty, named Mer, Murray Island. Paul Carter reminds us that ‘naming was an act of civilizing, that it did not refer naively to the locality, but was an assertion about possession, about the future where exploration would no longer be necessary’ (Carter, 1987, p. 65). We should be reminded here of the colonising force in the naming and renaming of Van Dieman’s Land. Beaconsfield itself

was named in 1879 after the then Prime Minister of Britain, Benjamin Disraeli, who had been made the first Earl of Beaconsfield in 1876. That Mer is now more often than not known by its Meriam name, unlike Flinders Island, tells us much about the reassertion of indigenous presence on the island. Carter explains that, ‘aboriginal names, with their local genealogies and resistance to possession (even pronunciation and transliteration), ... could be said to express the ‘otherness’ of the traveller’s experience, the sense in which it could not have been predicted and, for this reason, was valuable, the sense in which, too, any ‘possession’ was purely symbolic’ (p. 61). Indeed, it was on Mer in 1982 that Eddie Mabo, along with Sam Passi, Father Dave Passi and James Rice, launched a claim in the High Court on behalf of the people of Mer for the restoration of their rights in the land of Mer. In 1992 the High Court found in their favour. As David Lawrence and Helen Reeves Lawrence sum it up: ‘This landmark decision recognising Islanders’ legal rights to ‘native’ or ‘traditional’ title in land, led to the Commonwealth *Native Title Act 1993* which now provides a mechanism for consideration of Indigenous Australians’ claims to native title’ (2004, p. 27).

But we are way ahead of ourselves here. Meriam Mir is the language of Mer and for many it is their first language. We need to note this because there is an important politics around the use of English in Australia. The Department of Immigration and Multiculturalism and Indigenous Affairs (a combination of institutional concerns that, in itself, appears to equate migrants and indigenous Australians) describes English in official documents as Australia’s national language. Since 1 November 2005, all applicants applying to migrate to Australia in the category of General Skilled Migration and who are not from the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, the United States of

America, or Ireland, that is, people deemed not to be native speakers, have to take an International English Language System test to demonstrate their English language competency. While around 15% of Australians speak a language other than English at home, there is a prejudice centred among the dominant Anglo-Celts that Australians who do not speak English are not somehow proper Australians. This maps onto the divide in official Australian multiculturalism between Anglo-Celtic Australians and so-called ethnic Australians—that is, Australians with origins in non-English speaking countries. In other words, linguistic communication in Australia is closely allied to the privileging of British-derived culture as can be seen from the list of countries exempted. People applying as skilled migrants must now possess ‘vocational’ English. Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party, the right-wing political party founded by Pauline Hanson in 1996, has, as part of its political platform, that: ‘Passing a spoken and written English test [is] to be compulsory before naturalisation’ (Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, 1998). For those for whom English is not their first language, as is the case for many of the Mer people, and for other indigenous Australians, they are highly likely to be viewed as less Australian than, for example, Russell and Webb.

Meriam Mir is ‘structurally a typical Papuan language related to Bine, Gidra and Gizra languages from the Papuan coast to the north, [and] belongs to the Papuan (non-Austronesian) language family’ (Lawrence and Lawrence, 2004, p. 18). This is in contrast to the language spoken on many of the other Torres Strait Islands which, while including Melanesian elements, has the structure of Aboriginal languages (Beckett, 1987, p. 25). This suggests how, culturally, the people of the Torres Strait Islands merge the traditions of Papua and Australia, blurring any attempt to define a clear boundary. The

Immigration Restriction Act, passed immediately after Australian federation in 1901, attempted precisely this, that is, to create a clear boundary round Australia—a utopian channel, we could say—across which non-white people could not travel to reside permanently in the confined space of the new Australian state. From this point of view, the identification of mainland Australia as an island and the rhetorical importance so often given to the sea surrounding it can be understood as echoes of the modern utopian structure of thought. Anna Shnukal and Guy Ramsay explain that the Immigration Restriction Act was further refined:

A number of amendments followed, each more restrictive. In January 1904, the Commonwealth Naturalisation Act of 1903 came into force, giving the Commonwealth responsibility for the naturalisation of aliens (non-British subjects). It replaced the Queensland Aliens Act of 1867, which had excluded Asians (and Africans) on the grounds of being unmarried and less than three years resident in Queensland. (Shnukal and Ramsay, 2004, p. 43)

Queensland's relative permeability to people designated as non-white was being closed off.

All the Torres Strait Islands, up to just a few kilometres off the coast of Papua New Guinea, are a part of the Australian state. In 1872 the Queensland government began its northern push beyond the mainland of what was not yet the country of Australia by annexing all the islands within sixty miles of the coast. Seven years later, the passage of the *Queensland Coast Islands Act 1879* annexed for that state all the Torres Strait islands up to the Papuan coast. As Martin Nakata comments:

Thus, the [Queensland] government gained both strategic territorial control of the waters and the legitimate means to regulate the activities of the marine industry. So began a series of legislative Acts and amendments that also legitimated the regulation of the entire population of Islanders.

(Nakata, 2004, p. 156)

However, Queensland's territorial ambitions did not stop at the coast of Papua. In 1883, partially inspired by the likely German take-over of New Guinea which took place the following year, Queensland annexed Papua. This move was immediately repudiated by the British government which formally annexed Papua itself in 1888. Then, in 1906, following years of negotiation and the passing of the *Papua Act 1905*, the new Commonwealth of Australia government took control of what now had become known as British New Guinea. Papua became, in legal terms, a territory of Australia, a 'possession of the Crown' (Prince, 2005). In 1909, to celebrate the incorporation of Papua into the Australian Commonwealth, an extra point was added to the Commonwealth star on the Australian flag.

At this time, as I have indicated before, there was no such thing as Australian citizenship. Ann-Mari Jordens writes that:

Prior to 1921, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who were denied citizenship under colony or State law, had to apply to become British subjects in Australia in the same way as aliens. Under the Commonwealth *Nationality Act 1920* all Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders born after 1 January 1921 were natural-born British citizens. (Jordens, 1995, p. 10)

In the 1920s, then, all these people incorporated into Australia, the Torres Strait Islanders who had been incorporated when Queensland became a part of the federation and also the Papuans, had become, like the white Australians of the mainland, including Tasmania, British subjects. As Peter Prince points out:

The *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948* which created the status of Australian ‘citizen’ defines ‘Australia’ as including ‘Norfolk Island and the Territory of Papua. (Prince, 2005)

The Act does not mention the islands of the Torres Strait, these had been directly incorporated into Queensland before ‘Australia’ had a legal status. Prince goes on to explain that, as a result of the Act, ‘people born in Papua between 1948 and 1975 became Australian citizens by birth ... Despite being Australian citizens, however, people born in Papua required an entry permit under the Migration Act before they could travel to the Australian mainland.’ So, while Papua had been incorporated into ‘Australia’ and its people had become Australian citizens, they were understood to be beyond the border of the Australian community—I use this word deliberately echoing Howard’s usage in his celebration of the miners’ rescue—and required permission to set foot on what was constructed as the white *Australian* mainland, remembering that the indigenous people within the borders of the Australian state, as a racialised group, were at this time subject to state law rather than federal law.

Summing up another aspect of the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948*, Jordens writes that:

From 1948 to 1987 [the Act] defined an alien as ‘a person who does not have the status of a British subject and is not an Irish citizen or a protected

person.’ That is, the image of Australian enshrined in Australian citizenship was that of an Anglo-Celtic people. (Jordens, 1995, p. 1)

Not being aliens, Britons and Irish who settled in Australia had the same status as Australian citizens.

Section 51 (xxvi) of the Australian Constitution is commonly known as the ‘racism power.’ It enabled the federal parliament to make laws with respect to: ‘The people of any race, other than the aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws.’ It was this power which was changed by the success of the 1967 referendum giving the Commonwealth power over ‘the aboriginal race’ as well as all other races by deleting the specifying phrase. This does not mean that the racism power has been abolished. Australia has no Bill of Rights to protect its citizens and to ensure that all are treated equally regardless, in this case, of race. There is a history to the attempt to establish such a Bill for Australia which cannot be tracked here. Most recently such a Bill was introduced into the Federal Parliament in 1984 as the *Australian Human Rights Act*. It failed to gain majority support in the then Liberal and National party controlled Senate (see Williams, 1993, chapter 3, ‘Attempts at Reform’). George Williams, an advocate for an Australian Bill of Rights, writes that: ‘It is significant that nations that had previously relied upon the common law tradition, such as Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom, have recently adopted a Bill of Rights’ (1993, p. 13). In the United States, the first ten amendments to the American Constitution are regarded as that country’s Bill of Rights. Why does Australia continue to rely on common law to define the rights of citizens in respect of the Constitution? One answer takes us back to Bligh’s and Macquarie’s, and the other early Governors of the

Australian colonies', lack of respect for the rule of law. I have discussed this earlier in relation to convict society. There is a long history in Australia of governments not liking to be constricted in the ways that they can impinge upon the subjects over whom they rule. This can be seen in its most extreme form in the lineage of confinement and exclusion in Australia, a lineage that I have already mentioned. As Don McMaster notes: 'Settler Australia had its origins in a penal system; remnants of the penal attitude can still be found in exclusionary politics such as the White Australia and detention policies' (2001, p. 39). The races power is a crucial example of the means Australian government can use to exclude and confine.

In 1897 the Queensland Parliament passed the *Aboriginals' Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*. This Act 'implemented a system of tight controls and closed reserves' (Hodes, 2000, p. 166) for Aboriginal people. Here, again, we can see the imposition on indigenous people of the Australian preoccupation with confinement allied to exclusion from what Howard would term the Australian community. The 1897 Act did not apply to Torres Strait Islanders. Since 1885 John Douglas, previously the Premier of Queensland, had been the Government Resident for the Torres Strait Islands. He had a very high opinion of the Islanders, describing them in 1900 as:

British subjects. They are civilised people; they are being educated, and I say, should be treated as British subjects ... Of course there is a very great distinction between the natives of the Torres Strait and the natives of Australia ... The natives of the Torres Strait are capable of exercising all

the rights of British citizens and they ought to be regarded as such.

(Hodes, 2000, p. 167)

Twenty-one years after the completion of the annexation of the Torres Strait Islands, Douglas continues to distinguish them from mainland Australia, as he distinguishes the Islanders from Aborigines. Douglas argued strongly both here and in other fora that Islanders should have the same legal status as white Australians.

However, the tide of history was against him. We have already noted the new federal government tightening up entry laws in the early years of the twentieth century to keep out non-whites. In July 1904, Douglas died and the Queensland government ‘gradually began to extend the provisions of the 1897 Act to incorporate Torres Strait Islanders’ (Hodes, 2000, p. 167). Jeremy Beckett writes that: ‘The documentary sources do not indicate why the Islanders were brought under this regime after 1904’ (Beckett, 1987, p. 47). What the process did was homogenise the treatment of indigenous people in Queensland, regardless of their very different historical circumstances, and attempt to produce a clear distinction between indigenous and white ‘settler’ Australians—a distinction that would parallel the federal attempt clearly to limit ‘Australianness’ to white people. ‘White’ thus becomes defined against a confined and excluded, and homogenised, indigeneity. Maureen Perkins argues that:

It is widely understood in Australia that ‘black’ means Indigenous and that the converse of this is ‘white’. However, if blackness is about Indigenous identity, then it is *not* about the colour of skin, since an Aboriginal person of fair skin is just as Aboriginal as someone with dark skin. (Perkins, 2004, p. 178)

What Perkins is describing is the structural relation in which ‘whiteness’ is defined against an homogenised Other constructed as indigenous, and more conventionally named in the phrase ‘Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.’ In this process of transforming Torres Strait Islanders into indigenous people, Queensland was also increasing the incorporation of the annexed islands into that State and, by extension, into Australia.

One consequence of bringing the Islanders under the 1897 Act was the creation, in 1912, of ‘reserve islands’ of which Mer was one. The Tabos’ ancestors were the ones being confined. In Tasmania while Russell and Webb’s ancestors might have been convicts, though Webb actually hailed from Queensland, that confinement, as I have mentioned, is now celebrated. It is to the confinement of those who, in popular memory, are thought of as the last Tasmanian Aborigines on Flinders Island that we must look for the equivalence with the confinement, to their own islands in this case, of the people of Mer. If we think in terms of More’s *Utopia*, the people of Mer, who already lived on an island, were being placed in the position of the people of Abraxa. It was as a by-product of their inclusion in the Act that the people of Mer, and of the other Torres Strait islands, lost ownership of their land.

With little help from the Queensland government, Douglas persuaded John Bruce, originally from Scotland but now living on what the colonisers were calling Murray Island, to take over the school there that had been set up by the London Missionary Society. Alan Williamson tells us that: ‘The syllabus taught by Bruce was adapted from the Queensland model by reducing the number of classes from six to four

and simplifying its content to a standard of one level below its equivalent in schools on the mainland' (1992, p. 70). However, the school was not deficient in instilling:

a sense of patriotism towards the British Crown and things British. Schools were supplied with photos of the king and queen and provided opportunities for government officials to foster in children allegiance to crown, empire and nation ... Children also sang British songs, such as "Auld Lang Syne", while the "Murray Island boys" were reported to have led the singing of "Britons never shall be slaves", and "God Save the Queen" at the opening of the Mabuiag Island Church School in 1897. (Williamson, 1992, p. 71)

Such schooling was important in producing the islanders as Queenslanders, and subsequently also as Australians, while, at the same time, the extension of the *Aboriginals' Protection Act* and the lower standards in the Mer and other island schools ensured that islanders remained excluded from the white social order. In this process, Torres Strait Islanders were Australianised and Othered simultaneously, while also homogenising them with Aborigines, themselves a homogenised group, thus clarifying the internal border of whiteness.

The continuing linking together of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as indigenous Australians was epitomised in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). This was founded by the Labor government in 1990 and abolished by Howard's conservative government in 2005. ATSIC had an appointed Chairperson and a board mostly elected by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The main purpose of ATSIC was to oversee development projects for indigenous people.

However, in 1994 the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) was formed. This took over ATSIC's role in the Torres Strait Islands. This development has been seen among the Islands as a move towards greater autonomy within Australia. Appearing to echo Douglas' differentiation between Torres Strait Islanders and the Aborigines of mainland Australia, Howard's government did not abolish the TSRA when ATSIC was abolished.

As with Aborigines, the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948* gave Torres Strait Islanders Australian citizenship and the 1967 referendum transferred power over them to the federal government. Nevertheless, the status of the Torres Strait Islanders remains unsettled. About the time that Britain annexed Papua, Douglas had suggested that the more northerly islands, to the tenth degree south latitude, be removed being a part of Queensland to British New Guinea. Similar plans were proposed and negotiated with Queensland until the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. Mer would have been one of the islands shifted from Queensland to British New Guinea (on this history see Singe, 1989, pp. 113-116). In 1975, when Papua and New Guinea gained independence as Papua New Guinea, the idea of giving the islands above the tenth latitude to the new state was again seriously countenanced.

In the end, Papua New Guinea and Australia signed the Torres Strait Treaty in December 1978. At a meeting called by Gough Whitlam's federal Labor government in 1976 to discuss options prior to the agreement on a treaty Eddie Mabo first put forward the idea that the Torres Strait Islands should have an autonomous status within Australia (on this history see Russell, 2006, pp. 55-58). The Treaty came into force in 1985 and allows for some Papuans to enter the Torres Strait Protection Zone, which includes Mer, for traditional fishing purposes and also, more importantly for the argument here, allows

free cross-border movement of people living in the T.S.P.Z. into Papua and from Papua into the T.S.P.Z. for traditional purposes. In short, Mer is part of a regulated but deliberately porous border zone.

From the point of view of an Australianness that is presented as epitomised in Russell and Webb, the Tabos are caught up in a plurality of forces which construct them, and indeed their island home, Mer, as only problematically Australian. In this regard we should take note of Jordens' comment on Australian migration in the 1960s that: 'Whether non-Europeans temporarily resident in Australia were allowed to stay permanently ... depended on how well they integrated (1997, p. 218). The concept of absorption into the community has become an important criterion in deciding whether a person without citizenship can remain in Australia. As recently as the High Court's decision in *Te and Dang* (2002) Justice Gummow noted that:

Notions of 'membership of the Australian community,' 'absorption into the Australian community' and 'becoming part of the people of Australia' have been employed in the decisions of the Court to indicate a state of affairs which marks the passage of an individual beyond the range of the immigration power. (Qtd in Prince, 2003)

Is there, then, a single 'Australian community'? Certainly both John Tabo and Todd Russell wanted a steak after their rescue but this superficial similarity is not enough to over-ride the historical exclusions up to and including Rhodes' alienating 'these people' and Howard's ignoral of the Tabos' tremendous triumph over adversity, or for that matter the lack of media attention paid to the Tabos.

In 2001 the Australian government excised Christmas, Ashmore and Cartier Islands, along with the Cocos (Keeling) Islands from the Australian migration zone. The migration zone is the area within which an alien, that is, say, an asylum seeker, has to be treated as an unlawful non-citizen and must be detained. This gives the person the right to apply for a visa to stay in Australia. If such a person arrives at a place excised from Australia's migration zone, however, they can be treated as if they have not arrived in Australia and need not be given the same rights as someone who has arrived within the migration zone. The Australian government's concern, then, is to ensure that such a person does not set foot on Australian soil that is part of the migration zone. In July 2005 the Australian government excised all Queensland islands north of latitude 21 degrees south, which meant all the Torres Strait Islands. On 13 April 2006, four days before the *Tabos* put to sea, the Immigration Minister, Amanda Vanstone, announced a plan to process all asylum seekers, that is not only those whose boats make landfall in areas excised from the migration zone but including those that reach the Australian mainland, outside of the territory of Australia. This she has described as 'essentially an extension of the so-called "Pacific solution"' ("Govt confirms plan," 2006). On 9 May, the same day that the *Tabos*, and the miners, were rescued, three men from the Indonesian province of Papua were found on Boigu Island, one of the Torres Strait islands nearest the coast of Papua New Guinea and in the Torres Strait Protection Zone. These Indonesian nationals, however, do not come under the free travel arrangements of the zone. Vanstone said that 'the men [are] not entitled to seek protection as they arrived at an excised place and are "offshore entry people"' ("More Papuans found," 2006). Also on 9 May Australian Customs announced that 'more than 100 illegal fishermen and twelve boats [had] been

caught in the Gulf of Carpentaria in the past fortnight' ("Customs sweep," 2006). These traditional fishermen, on the west side of Cape York peninsula above which are the Torres Strait Islands, may or may not have been in their traditional fishing grounds. The area is under Australian sovereignty.

The Tabos' story is one of the ambivalent incorporation of their home into the territory of the state of Australia. In this story their island is part of a deliberately porous border zone which, while admirable in intent, is anxiety-producing for predominantly white settler Australians a part of whose Australian culture is the historical desire for clear borders which can be used to exclude those unwanted in the Australian community. The Tabos' story is also of the divided demands of white Australia, of their people's Australianisation on white terms while, at the same time, they were excluded from that dominant, historically white, Australian settler society. It is, as the Rhodes quotation makes clear, a story of their construction as Other within Australia—to the extent that the Torres Strait Islands have been agreed to be a part of Australia. These islands are no longer within Australia's migration zone and, while the government and its jurists have spent time explaining that this does not mean that the islands are any less Australian and the people any less Australian citizens, for people who have always been constructed as not proper Australians, and whose islands in the not so distant past were identified as reserves and their land as not theirs but as belonging to the Crown, such reassurances are understandably not completely satisfactory.

The Tabos were treated suspiciously because they reminded settler Australians of things that they would rather not have to think about. The Tabos story conjures up white Australian anxieties about asylum seeker boat people, about indigenous land claims,

about who exactly is ‘Australian’ and what are the components of Australian culture. Where Russell and Webb’s story is about whiteness and the reassertion of what have come to be called core Australian values—mateship, resilience, family, triumph against the odds, and all those other things that Howard and Beazley and others associated with the miners—to identify the Tabos with these same values would be to threaten the hegemony of Australian whiteness. The Tabos, then, were, to all intents and purposes, ignored by the media, by settler Australia. As we saw at the beginning, where the Tabos’ rescue was mentioned it was often compared with Russell and Webb’s ‘great escape,’ using the latter as the point of comparison. In this instance, everyday racism functioned by ignoring or, at worst, undermining, the Mer miracle or, at best, diminishing the Tabos’ extraordinary story by making it secondary to the also extraordinary story of Russell and Webb.

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- ¹ Notoriously, Todd Russell is reported subsequently to have said: ‘That Sustagen, I wouldn’t feed it to my dog’ and ‘Whatever you do kids, don’t drink Sustagen.’
- ² In 1985 the (white) Neil Murray wrote a very successful song about Australia called ‘(My) Island Home.’ Murray co-founded the pioneering Aboriginal rock group, the Warumpi Band. ‘(My) Island Home’ is on the group’s second album, *Go Bush!*, released in 1987. Having worked with Murray, the Torres Strait Islander, Christine Anu, recorded the song in 1995 and it became a very big mainstream hit, winning the Australian Recording Industry award for the best single of that year. It is also on her album *Stylin’ Up* released in 1995. Anu subsequently sang the song in the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in 2000. While she was born in Cairns, her mother comes from Saibai Island, just off the Papua New Guinea coast, and her father is from Mabuiag Island near the centre of the Torres Strait. Unfortunately, there is no space here to unpack this fascinating history of the song, its singers and its relationship to indigenous Australians, to white Australians, and to Australian islands any further (for one discussion see McMahon, 2003, pp. 190-193). I cannot resist one anecdote,

however. When I was in Honolulu, Hawai'i, in 1994, I heard the song sung on the radio by a local group using it to assert native Hawai'ian identity.

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